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The Great Bengal Famine in Britain: Metropolitan Campaigning for Food Relief and the End of Empire, 1943–44

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Introduction

On a Friday in early November 1943, representatives of seven famine relief committees, raising funds in Britain to aid the starving in India, gathered in the India

House in London.¹ In the opening passage of the joint press communique released thereafter they stated: ‘the British public has been deeply stirred by the widespread suffering due to famine conditions in Bengal and elsewhere in India.’² The meeting signified a rather sudden shift in British public consciousness that had occurred in October, when the famine in Bengal emerged both as a news item in Britain and a cause célèbre for its do-gooders. Information about the ‘food situation’ in Bengal had started to filter through to the metropole in early 1943 but it was only with the publication of images of emaciated and skeletonised bodies of Indian famine victims in late September that the public began to debate the state of the crisis and its remedies.³ In sharp contrast to the previous months, in which the lack of news on the crisis was paralleled by a dearth of humanitarian initiatives, the last quarter of 1943 saw the proliferation of relief committees and the growing willingness to donate to alleviate the suffering in India. The palpable change of public opinion probably even led to the decision of the British Government to finally address the calamity in November, when the newly appointed Viceroy Wavell deployed the Royal Air Force to provide food and medical relief.⁴

At the time the metropolitan public learned about the calamity in Bengal, the famine had already reached its peak. In July 1943 hundreds of thousands of starving destitutes migrated in search for work and relief to Bengal’s urban centre Calcutta. Many of them died painfully on the streets of the city in the following months. With the colonial government unwilling to acknowledge the crisis and with the needs of the population outstripping the capacities of Indian private relief organisations by far, the famine developed into a disaster of appalling dimensions. In the years 1943 and 1944 an estimated number of 3 million people perished, while many more were rendered homeless and destitute. The crisis deeply shattered the social and economic structure of the province, which remained on the brink of crisis in the years to come.⁵

At first sight, the emergence of relief committees in Britain could be interpreted as the result of a wave of sympathy and empathy that swept across British society once graphic representations of suffering in Bengal circulated in the press.⁶ Empathetic reactions of the British public are revealed in letters to the press and to the organisers of anti-famine committees. They also showed in a widespread willingness to support such institutional bodies and to donate towards mitigating the effects of the crisis. In this context, the British Quaker Horace Alexander concluded:

The sufferers in Bengal live thousands of miles away, many of the donors may never have spoken to an Indian in their life, but not even the fact that we are in the late stages of a war in which many people have suffered severe loss of their own – nothing can check the *stream of compassion* flowing out to meet the needs of starving people.⁷

At variance with this interpretation of British reactions to the misery in the eastern province of India, the article will show that the mobilisation of food

relief for the starving was more complicated than suggested. The growing public support of food aid for Bengal – rather than being a spontaneous expression of humanitarian sentiments or an unchecked ‘stream of compassion’ – was the outcome of contested narratives and representations of the crisis as provided by Indian nationalists, anti-imperialists and apologists of the Empire. On the one hand, Indian nationalist associations joined ranks with British Socialists and Communists to portray the famine as the ultimate proof of the failure of colonial rule and to call for an end of imperialism. On the other hand, a series of British press reports based demands for aid on imperial solidarity, while conservatives lapsed into nineteenth century rhetoric that saw the famine as a re-affirmation of India’s inability to self-rule. This article therefore argues that the growing public support for food aid to India and the final decision of the colonial authorities to provide relief emerged from contestations between these different groups and voices. The campaigns of anti-imperialists and Indian nationalists played a much-needed counterweight to official statements that downplayed and denied the crisis in Bengal and thereby forced the government to engage in a public debate on food relief for India. Emerging metropolitan debates on famine relief, thereby, further shed light on political and ideological contestations that accompanied the last years of British rule in India and the beginning age of decolonisation. Used as a prism, metropolitan anti-famine campaigns during the Bengal famine provide historians insights into the complex interactions and alliances of anti-imperialists in Britain.

Any exploration of the evolution of British responses and reactions to the famine in Bengal will necessarily observe the centrality of graphic depictions of human suffering in the emergence of demands for relief.⁸ Although only a handful of famine images from Bengal were available to convey the disaster to audiences in Britain, they played a crucial role in attracting attention and empathetic responses. Their initial power lay in their ability to prove the actuality of starvation extant in Britain’s most important colony. It was with the publication of photographs that the official strategy of denying the existence of the crisis began to fail. Once these photographs circulated in Britain – and were debated, commented upon and exhibited to even broader audiences – they were framed and re-framed to match narratives employed to support multiple political and humanitarian claims. In this regard, the metropolitan discourse of the Bengal famine provides a lurid example of the historical conflation of humanitarian and political rhetoric in the visual media, pointing to the importance of the contexts in which such images were employed and interpreted.⁹ On the one hand, this conflation draws attention to the problematic and flawed connection of mediated representations of disasters and responses to such humanitarian crises, which has recently become a subject of historical analysis and continues to form a matter of contemporary debates.¹⁰ On the other hand, it points to the interdependence of the histories of colonialism, empire, and humanitarianism that has complicated the understanding of the evolution of

humanitarian movements in general.¹¹ This article aims to contribute to the growing field of historical enquiry on humanitarianism by exploring anti-famine campaigns in Britain that simultaneously aimed to mobilise food relief and anti-colonial sentiments.

The Context: Famine, War and Indian Nationalism in Britain

Although a series of processes and decisions contributed to the making of this tragedy, the famine in India's eastern province of Bengal could not have occurred without the pervasive disturbances brought upon India by the war. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Britain began to draw heavily on the subcontinent's resources.¹² When Japan advanced in the East and Burma fell, the East of Bengal became a frontline and defending India against the enemy was considered essential for warding off the collapse of the British Empire.¹³ In mid-1942, the British authorities in India had introduced a scorched earth campaign that aimed to deter Japan from invading India but essentially deprived Bengal's agriculturalists from their means of income.¹⁴ Adding to the impoverishment of the rural population, in October 1942, the coastal line of Orissa and Bengal was first hit by a cyclone and then by tidal waves that devastated the landscape and made the region more vulnerable to the coming famine. The disaster affected 2.5 million who died, lost their livelihood or were uprooted.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the inflationary pressure of the war economy gave way to the sharp increase of rice prices, rendering the main ingredient of the Bengali diet increasingly unaffordable. Even as clear signs of an imminent catastrophe became visible, the colonial authorities refrained from using well-established mechanisms to counter famine to safeguard the operation of the war machinery.¹⁶ At the same time, press regulations were employed to interrupt the circulation of any information from Bengal that might mean an advantage to the enemy.¹⁷ Fearing that the famine in Bengal would provide an incentive to Japan to commence its invasion into India, news about the crisis was suppressed and the existence of a famine officially denied.¹⁸

The censorship, however, was porous. Information on the impending crisis trickled into the metropole through networks of the Indian diaspora, through letters of British and American soldiers and through the increasing number of war correspondents who cabled reports from the South East Asian war theatre to audiences worldwide.¹⁹ In Britain, Indian nationalist associations and British leftist groups began to write and speak about the emerging crisis as early as January 1943. Using multiple channels of communication, anti-imperialists voiced their critique in pamphlets, posters and the printed press, as well as through conferences, rallies and protest walks. In the process, they used the crisis to highlight the failure of Britain to meet even the basic needs of its colonial subjects. Persons and associations in Britain aligning themselves with the quest for Indian self-rule thereby contributed considerably to the growing awareness

about the famine and increased the pressure on the colonial administration to provide food relief.

Indian nationalism had prospered in Britain from the early twentieth century through the exchanges of the members of the diasporic Indian community and British anti-imperialists, whose cooperation at its outset was considered a major destabilising force in the empire. The political activism of Indians in Britain – who came to the metropole since the mid-nineteenth century – was decisively nourished by the everyday experience of racial and colonial hierarchies and sustained by the accelerating Indian nationalist movement in India. The latter deliberately targeted the metropole to increase pressure on the colonial structure.²⁰ Due to growing demands for labour during the Second World War, the number of Indians in Britain grew in these years, but the Indian community as a whole remained a small numeric minority.²¹ It was also divided by class and education, with an intellectual elite that was in touch with contemporary life in Britain and an often illiterate group of manual labourers who, subjected to exploitative employment structures, struggled to make a living in the metropole.²²

A few eminent personalities sought to transcend these boundaries and to unite the Indian working class and the elite in their struggle against colonialism.²³ One such example was V. K. Krishna Menon, who would go on to hold a series of notable offices in India and Britain after Independence.²⁴ In 1943, British authorities were already deeply aware of his political potential. Aiming to slow down his activism in London, the authorities had tried to conscript him but repeatedly failed in light of Menon's claim of ill-health.²⁵ Menon had attracted the attention of Scotland Yard for his role in nourishing and organising Indian nationalist sentiments in Britain. In 1930 he had founded the India League, which quickly became a meeting place of Indian and British anti-colonialists.²⁶ The India League benefitted from the endorsement of the largest Indian political party, the Indian National Congress (INC), which bestowed upon the League the status of liaison between the nationalist movement in India and sympathisers of Indian self-rule in Britain.²⁷ Soon after its inception, the India League successfully enlisted the support of British liberal politicians and public figures and, drawing on Menon's well-established networks to political parties and working class organisations, expanded from London to various cities across Britain.²⁸ Although Menon was a staunch Socialist, the League opted for various partnerships and coalitions throughout its existence in its quest for funding and strategic advantage. In 1934, after Stalin propagated the Popular Front Policy, Communists worldwide again started to seek alliances with anti-imperialist forces. In this context, the League attracted the attention of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which increasingly participated in the League's meetings and contributed to its budget.²⁹ The alliance obviated other partnerships and decreased its support amongst those Indians who disapproved of the growing influence of Communism on the India League. When Communists in Britain

decided to join the British war effort and strove to mobilise Indians in Britain and at home to fight the Axis powers, the India League's proximity to Communism further disenchanted former Indian supporters.³⁰

Although Anti-fascism and Communism provided strong incentives for Indians in Britain to embrace the war effort, a rising number of Indians, especially amongst the working class, opposed it. Reasons for this growing opposition varied. On the one hand, Indians intended to stay aloof from the British 'imperialist war' to express their solidarity with the imprisoned Indian political leadership back home.³¹ In August 1942 the Indian National Congress famously demanded that the British 'quit India', and faced severe reprisal.³² On the other hand, the contentious issue of conscription of Indians in Britain further fed the opposition to the war as South Asians living in Britain for more than two years were called for National Service. Protests against the conscription of Indians were taken up by Indian nationalist and working class organisations, which provided the services of affiliated lawyers and doctors to help members to circumvent recruitment.³³ This made British authorities more suspicious of Indians, whose supposedly questionable loyalty was conceived as even more dangerous during the war. As such, the Second World War affected the life of Indians in Britain in multiple ways, sharpening antagonisms and complicating loyalties.³⁴ Due to the India League's endorsement of the British war effort, it increasingly failed to represent the full spectrum of Indian opinion in the metropole. Former supporters of the League established new associations.³⁵

The Indian Freedom Campaign (IFC) united prior India League members with pacifists and liberals in their quest to promote Indian self-rule. Fenner Brockway, an influential British Socialist and previously an ally of Menon, became the chair of the IFC. Brockway was born in Calcutta in 1888 as the son of British Missionaries. He was sent to London for his education and later worked as a journalist and political activist in Britain. He officially entered the British political scene by joining the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as its Political Secretary in 1926–29, becoming its Chairman in 1933–39 and its General Secretary in 1939–46.³⁶ The ILP was a socialist party and assembled a diverse group of anti-Communists in Britain. As early as 1938, Brockway had expressed his discontent over the growing influence of Communists on the India League, to the future Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.³⁷ Initially intended to stay close to the Labour Party to push it further to the Left, the ILP turned increasingly radical during Brockway's guardianship and eventually became untenable for Labour.³⁸ As a staunch pacifist and anti-colonialist, Brockway saw the Second World War as a defining moment in the termination of imperialism and strongly disagreed with Labour's views on 'the colonial question'.³⁹ He promoted these views in its role as an editor of the ILP's mouthpiece the *New Leader*, which he used to express his critique of British imperialism, to demand that the British withdraw from its colonies and to promote the unity of Socialists in Britain and India.⁴⁰

Another Indian nationalist institution that likewise emerged from, and contributed to, the diversification of Indian nationalism in Britain was Swaraj House. Mimicking the activities of the League, Swaraj House provided reading rooms in its central office in London where it supplied its visitors with Indian newspapers and books to stimulate the discussion on contemporary developments in India. Swaraj House united Indian supporters of the INC but intended to overcome colonial rule without support of British sympathisers. In contrast to the League, Swaraj House thus did not entertain contacts to Members of Parliament and was largely financed through subscriptions of its Indian members.⁴¹ It nevertheless fostered contact with likeminded associations, such as the Indian Freedom Campaign, and strongly welcomed the initiative to lobby for Indian self-rule. During the Second World War, both Swaraj House and the India League tried to expand their influence by vying for the support of the Indian seamen and factory workers through the offer of assistance, and by seeking alliances with eminent figures and organisations of the working class movement. However, despite their efforts to represent the entire Indian diaspora in Britain, both organisations struggled to counter their reputation as elite institutions.

Campaigning for Food Relief and Indian Self-Rule: Indian Nationalist Agitation in Britain

Swaraj House began to write and talk about famine in India as early as January 1943, shortly after the Secretary of State for India, Leopold S. Amery, had expressed his disbelief in the presence of famine conditions in India in the House of Commons.⁴² In reaction to Amery's statements, Swaraj House printed five thousand copies of a pamphlet called 'Famine? India's destitute millions starving today.'⁴³ The pamphlet was advertised in early February through a press conference at the Bengal India Restaurant in Percy Street.⁴⁴ Its author was the Indian economist and agricultural expert Nagendranath Gangulee, who had received his education at the Universities of Calcutta, Illinois, and London, after which he temporarily settled in India to experiment in farming and rural welfare.⁴⁵ Gangulee belonged to the class of Indians who had received their education at Western institutions in India and abroad and who were convinced that India needed to be modernised first before colonialism could be overcome. In the interwar period he became an expert on Indian agriculture and published a series of books and essays on questions of rural reconstruction.⁴⁶ As a member of the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture⁴⁷, and later as temporary employee of the British Ministry of Information, Gangulee contributed to the promotion of British agricultural methods in India.⁴⁸ While it is evident that the colonial authorities recurrently relied on Gangulee's standing to disseminate agricultural knowledge, they remained sceptical about his political views and affiliations. In 1940 Scotland Yard classified him

eventually as a person ‘holding strong anti-British and pro-Nazi sentiments’⁴⁹ – claims which had little evidence but showed that the British authorities were uneasy with Gangulee’s connections to the Indian nationalist movement. Indeed, over the years his name appeared constantly on the lists of participants in meetings of the India League and Swaraj House.⁵⁰ The rivalry of these associations did not stop him from joining both, although he increasingly stated his dissatisfaction with the India League.⁵¹

The British authorities deemed Gangulee’s pamphlet on famine ‘unfortunate’ and less likely to be ‘an honest or sincere document.’⁵² The pamphlet debunked Amery’s statements on the current food situation in India and drew on Gangulee’s reputation as an approved scientist to claim that there was a food crisis unfolding in the subcontinent.⁵³ The latter assembled a series of Indian press statements to indicate the seriousness of the famine and to dismantle official reactions as inappropriate at best. In a crescendo spread across six pages, the pamphlet came to the conclusion that ‘the food crisis has once again thrown the question of India’s subjection into sharp relief’ and that ‘a People’s Government alone [...] can deal with the problems confronting India today.’⁵⁴

Soon after Swaraj House made the famine a matter of nationalist agitation, the India League too started to warn about a shortage of food.⁵⁵ Thereafter the famine conditions in India appeared recurrently on the agenda of the League’s meetings.⁵⁶ For instance, with the support of an eminent leader of the South Asian working class movement, Ayub Ali, the India League opened an office in East London in June 1943. This was situated just above Ali’s Shah Jolal Restaurant at 76 Commercial Street which was a meeting point of Indian seamen and workers in the eastern part of the city.⁵⁷ By reminding the audience ‘that while they were helping the British Government, sacrificing their lives in bringing food to this country, their kith and kin in India were starving’⁵⁸ Indian workers and seamen were asked to join the League in their struggle against colonial exploitation. During the following months, members of the Indian working class community joined public campaigns of the India League and Swaraj House to bring demands for food relief to the streets of Britain.⁵⁹

The ‘Empire’s Second City’ in Crisis: British Press Responses and Growing Nationalist Agitation

Despite the early efforts of Indian nationalist associations in Britain to attract attention to the famine in India, only occasionally did reports on the ‘food situation’ make it into the columns of British dailies.⁶⁰ In conjunction with censorship, the lack of awareness in Britain for events in India was considerably facilitated by the fact that the press was busy selling the daily horrors of the war. In addition, the reports of human tragedies in war-torn Europe that filled the news in Britain fully consumed the attention of philanthropists and humanitarians struggling to counter the persuasiveness of total war rhetoric.

India, it seems, was temporarily removed from public debates in Britain and only resurfaced in British dailies in the end of September 1943 with the publication of a first series of reports from the famine-affected districts. For Indian nationalists and the British left, the proliferation of reports, articles, and images by English-owned and widely circulated newspapers gave credibility to their claims. Thus, after the British press reported about the Bengal famine, nationalist agitation gained considerable momentum.⁶¹

The first report of the Bengal famine appeared in Britain in late September 1943 in the *Sunday Pictorial*, which declared it a British duty to provide relief to the famine victims.⁶² At this time, the left-leaning newspaper had already attracted the Government's attention for its allegedly subversive statements.⁶³ Risking further discontent, the newspaper published the 'first full story of Indian horror' under the heading 'Thousands die of famine.'⁶⁴ The story was written by the United Press correspondent Walter Briggs, who had cabled a graphic description of his eyewitness account to London:

I saw 3 and 4 year old children digging into the rat-pillaged food scraps from overturned dust-bins. [...] Round the corner an orchestra was playing "Sweet Sue" and one of Calcutta's big hotels was serving dinner – and there were seventeen courses on the menu.⁶⁵

Walter Briggs's statement quickly circulated in left-wing publications such as the *Socialist Appeal* and the Communist *Daily Worker*.⁶⁶ His gloomy description of the situation in Calcutta inspired the cartoonist Jimmy Friell Gabriel to provide the readers of the *Daily Worker* with a biting attack on the British Government. Visualising Briggs's statement in his cartoon, Gabriel added a plate that attributed the victim's misery to '100 Years of White Raj Rule.'⁶⁷ In addition to its publication in the *Daily Worker*, Gabriel's cartoon found its way to the front page of the October edition of the India League's *NewsIndia*, where it was now placed next to a drawing of the caricaturist Victor Weisz (also known as Vicky) and framed by the heading 'Famine Sweeps India.'⁶⁸ Weisz, a German Jew who had experienced the rise of Hitler in Germany, had fled to Britain in 1935 where he quickly emerged as a widely known political cartoonist. Employed full-time by the left-leaning *News Chronicle*, Vicky drew a series of depictions of Indian famine victims in 1943.⁶⁹ Intriguingly, he had never been to India but drew his inspiration from photographs that now begun to circulate in Britain at the time.⁷⁰

The *Sunday Pictorial*, as a follow-up to its first article, published two images of the famine in late September.⁷¹ It had received these images from the Calcutta-based newspaper *The Statesman*, which had captured moments of mass starvation in Calcutta through images of bodies and faces of helpless Indian women and children who populated the streets of the 'Empire's second city'.⁷² In continuity with earlier practices of picturing starving colonial subjects, the images focussed on the bodies of victims, and primarily captured females

and infants. One of the first images depicted an unconscious and topless young woman lying in the arms of a kneeling man –⁷³ a gender-inverted pieta that alluded to the innocence, vulnerability and utter helplessness of the female victim (and her effeminate male companion). The showcased bareness of the victim bears strong resemblance to earlier colonial photography, which depicted nakedness to proclaim the backwardness of colonised societies.⁷⁴ The images entailed the claim that the starving in India were deserving objects of British relief efforts.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to illuminate the pre-history of the use and reception of photographic accounts of famine in India, it is important to take notice of these earlier precedents. Accounts of famines in colonial India circulated and attracted the attention of distant audiences since at least the mid-nineteenth century – a dynamic that gained considerable traction with the introduction of the hand-held Kodak camera and with the advancement of printing technologies towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁷⁵ Coinciding with a spate of devastating famine calamities in India in the last decades of the nineteenth century, this technological advancement paired with a greater presence of journalists in the subcontinent fuelled the emergence of a genre of colonial famine photography. By this time, images of famine were already employed to visually substantiate claims of India's alleged backwardness and otherness, as well as to showcase India's economic exploitation under colonial rule.⁷⁶ Such claims were rendered explicit as the photographs were embedded in articles, framed by captions, and introduced by headings, and thereby came to be woven into narratives aiming to mobilise action on behalf of the famine-affected.

In 1943, the *Sunday Pictorial* printed the first set of images together with a lengthy caption that referred to the resemblance of the images to pictures of the concurrent famine crisis in Greece under Nazi occupation (1942–1944):⁷⁷

These people are dying of hunger. They are not German slaves in Greece. They are citizens of the British Empire in India. These pictures were taken from the famous Calcutta newspaper "The Statesman" and they show men and women – one clasping a baby – collapsed and dying for want of food – in the streets of the city. There can be no excuse for this shameful neglect. All Britain must demand that these people are fed without delay, by the Government whose job it must be.⁷⁸

This reference to the famine crisis in Greece was no one-off.⁷⁹ Contemporary commentators frequently referred to starvation in war-torn Europe in their discussions and reports of the Bengal famine, and the plight of Greeks emerged as a benchmark to which the suffering in Bengal could be compared and assessed. For instance, N. Gangulee had already stated in January that 'the famine in India is as much a consequence of her political servitude as the famine in Greece or other occupied countries in Europe.'⁸⁰ The crisis in Greece had given way to the formation of relief committees across Britain such as the famous Oxford Committee for Food Relief (later Oxfam), which aimed to

mobilise aid in Britain.⁸¹ In order to solicit donations, such relief committees employed photographs of ‘rag-swathed bodies being collected in a lorry from the streets, of dead children lying in a cemetery awaiting mass burial, of women rummaging in garbage heaps for scraps of food, of little, skin-covered skeletons.’⁸² While this accounted for a temporal and content-based convergence of famine visuals from India and Greece to be consumed by audiences in Britain, narrative strategies employed to mobilise sympathy differed. For most people in Britain it was not difficult to identify with Greeks who shared their religion, skin colour, and disdain for German fascism and were in relatively close geographical proximity.⁸³ In the case of Bengal, the religion, skin colour and dubious political affiliation of Indians, in conjunction with the great spatial distance between the metropole and colony rendered them no ‘natural’ objects of British sympathy.

Since the late eighteenth century colonial philanthropists had developed strategies to bridge such differences to enable people in Britain to identify with the plight of colonial subjects. Such strategies revolved around references to the primitiveness of the Indian society on the one hand and the metropolitan duty to civilise the latter on the other hand.⁸⁴ In 1943, newspapers such as the *Sunday Pictorial* invoked the notion of imperial citizenship to mobilise British sympathy for starving Indians.⁸⁵ Although imperial citizenship was a hollow concept that provided no legal benefits to colonial subjects, it worked as a narrative strategy. In this abstract concept of citizenship, the differences between Britons and Indians, which at other times were employed to limit and circumscribe the responsibility for the suffering in India, collapsed and enabled people in the metropole to identify with the other. Under the guise of twentieth century rhetoric, British audiences could engage in an act of benevolence that was little different from their nineteenth century precursors. Helping starving Indians because they were co-citizens, in the meanwhile, solidified the empire in rhetoric and in action at a time when it was crumbling. Indeed, for contemporary conservatives, little had changed since the late nineteenth century, when colonial images of famine in India had been employed to legitimise colonial rule and to stage its intervention as an act of benevolence towards its subjects.⁸⁶

According to the ex-editor of *The Statesman* Alfred Watson, who frequently voiced his comments on Indian affairs in the press in 1943, the famine ‘should give pause to the believers in ‘independence.’⁸⁷ This assessment was challenged by Indian nationalists and the British left who used the same visuals of the crisis to argue the opposite, i.e. the legitimacy of India’s claim for independence. For them photographs of the famine displayed the failure of the British colonial government to modernise India, and illustrated the neglect of the empire and the well-being of its Indian subjects.

The October edition of the Independent Labour Party’s *New Leader* featured a photo collage that used the images of *The Statesman* to depict the British Minister of Home Affairs, Herbert Morrison, and the British Prime Minister

Winston Churchill leaning towards groups of starving Indian women and children.⁸⁸ One citation of Morrison and Churchill each praised the achievements of British imperialism and outlined the intention to cling to its colonial possessions. At the time Morrison was also being quoted for his remarks on the future of the colonies, in which he swept aside the mounting requests for political self-determination in the British Empire's colonial outposts stating that granting independence to its colonies 'would be like giving a child of ten a latch-key, a bank account, and a shotgun.'⁸⁹ Using the famine to uncover the internal contradictions of imperial rule, Fenner Brockway also tuned in to the demand of Indian nationalists for the quick withdrawal of the British from India. In a series of publications in the *New Leader* and in pamphlets of the Indian Freedom Campaign, Brockway identified the famine as a central theme to press for the release of India's imprisoned political leadership.⁹⁰

In the same month, the Federation of Indian Associations in Great Britain (FIAGB) – an offshoot of Swaraj House – appointed a famine (sub-)committee which aimed to 'seek ways and means of spreading propaganda among the British public.'⁹¹ FIAGB had subsumed the local branches of the Indian Workers Association under its banner and thereby united protest marches and demonstration meetings carried out by Indian workers and seamen under its aegis.⁹² In October, FIAGB addressed the public with a pamphlet that used images from *The Statesman* to ridicule Amery's denial of the crisis. It appealed to its readers to use contacts to political parties, trade union organisations, and co-operative societies to heighten the pressure on the Government. Blaming the Government for the famine, FIAGB demanded the stop of exports of food from India and the import of food to the famine-afflicted provinces. It pressed for India's independence as the means to safeguard India's food security arguing that 'only the Government of a free and democratic India [...] can understand the people's needs and troubles and can remedy them.'⁹³

Unlike in late January when the absence of press reports and images enabled Amery to deny the seriousness of the crisis in India, only days after the *Sunday Pictorial* had picked up on the situation, the Secretary of State for India had to admit that there was a 'menace of famine'⁹⁴ in Bengal before the House of Commons. He nevertheless continued to dilute the Government's responsibility by attributing the crisis to profiteering and hoarding. In the subsequent weeks, verbal attacks on Amery increased to the point that it was no longer possible for him to visit his constituency in Sparkbrook, Birmingham without facing demonstrations and interruptions of angry Indians. Birmingham was a stronghold of the Indian working class movement and a series of associations and organisations now mobilised to demand the resignation of Amery. Waiting in front of the venue building, the Indian Workers Association held up banners reading 'Churchill and Amery are killing men, women and children in India'⁹⁵ and distributed leaflets that placed the Bengal famine within a historical

trajectory of famine crises in India, accusing the British of deliberately trying to starve out revolutionaries.⁹⁶

Amery's attempts in late September to deflect accusations further induced British Communists to express their discontent. Delegates in Bedfordshire unanimously passed a resolution on the famine in which they emphasised the Government's role in the making of the calamity.⁹⁷ While British Communists joined other leftists groups in their condemnation of the crisis and in their critique of colonialism, Communist representations of the famine were heavily shaped by the CPGB's support of Britain's war effort.⁹⁸ As such, Communists in Britain (and India) framed demands for food aid as a danger to the wellbeing of British soldiers stationed in Bengal and as an obstacle to the full mobilisation of India against the fascist threat.⁹⁹ At the same time, Communists in Britain employed reports on the famine in India to promote solidarity on part of British workers towards their Indian brethren, and advertised the efforts of the Communist Party of India to address the calamity.¹⁰⁰ Shortly after the Bedfordshire meeting, the India League gathered more than 300 persons in Holborn, London to discuss the famine in a two-day conference. A number of eminent British Communists endorsed the conference. A founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and a key figure in the British labour movement, Rajani Palme Dutt, joined the conference and incited the audience with his speech.¹⁰¹ In addition, the 'Red Dean of Canterbury'¹⁰² Hewlett Johnson - an ardent supporter of Stalin whom he had met personally in his function as a Western church leader - expressed his support through a written statement that was read in his absence.¹⁰³ In a lengthy resolution passed by the members of the conference, demands for food aid joined the call for the immediate withdrawal of the British from India.¹⁰⁴ This led British newspapers to conclude that 'the object of the conference was more political than humanitarian.'¹⁰⁵

Beyond Agitation: Food Relief for India

Cleavages amongst the heterogeneous supporters of Indian self-rule in Britain became visible in the ensuing campaigns for food relief. Whereas the India League organised material famine relief through a relief committee, Swaraj House objected to the idea of private relief to the extent that they turned down requests from their own members to use their collected money to provide succour to the starving.¹⁰⁶ This meant that although Indian nationalists and British anti-colonialists raised awareness for the famine, only a small fraction of the campaigners themselves took advantage of the increasing publicity in Britain to mobilise famine relief. Swaraj House as well as the Indian Freedom Campaign concentrated on highlighting the Government's responsibility to care for the starving in Bengal. Given the magnitude of the disaster, these organisations had a point. Private relief was only able to save a few whereas increasing the pressure on the British Government bore the chance of ending

the crisis permanently. In addition, these organisations had very limited resources at hand and had to decide whether a fund would indeed attract enough money to legitimise its existence. The India League on the other hand was able to rely on the support of the Communist Party and Members of Parliament and was therefore in a unique position. It created the India Relief Committee (IRC), which attracted substantial support in Britain throughout the crisis.

As an off-shoot of the India League, the Committee could build upon the League's network to establish local famine relief sub-committees in cities across Britain.¹⁰⁷ The Committee appealed to the public through the India League's mouthpiece *NewsIndia*, through pamphlets, various meetings, rallies, and conferences organised across the country. The donations solicited in Britain were sent to India and distributed under the supervision of the Communist and General Secretary of the Indian Trade Union Congress N.M. Joshi, to a series of local relief agencies in India.¹⁰⁸

The core group of the India Relief Committee in London was chaired by Krishna Menon, with the famous Mulk Raj Anand¹⁰⁹ serving as secretary and the Welsh politician Clement Davies as its president.¹¹⁰ Clement Davies belonged to a group of liberal MPs affiliated with the India League who, throughout the crisis, kept questioning the Secretary of State for India, Amery, in the House of Commons. Another important figure in this regard was Reginald Sorensen.¹¹¹ Brother-in-law of Fenner Brockway, Sorensen was formerly affiliated with the ILP and later joined Labour. He had served as a secretary of the India League in 1937 and despite growing disagreements with Menon continued to join the League's meetings. During the famine he published a series of pamphlets through the India League in which he linked the demands for food relief and independence and added a hint of pathos: 'Bodies must be fed but men and women also need freedom, otherwise democracy itself will be starved.'¹¹² After the war, Sorensen was a member of the parliamentary delegation to India that was employed to prepare negotiations for the transfer of power.

The lengthy list of vice-presidents who lent their formal support to the Committee included eminent British public personalities, many of whom were already affiliated with the India League by this time. One of them was the Quaker Horace Alexander who simultaneously ran a famine relief committee soliciting donations for the work of British Quakers in India.¹¹³ Alexander had been the soul and brain of the Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU). The latter had come to Bengal in light of the recent attacks by Japan, which motivated the FAU to extend its Air Raid Precaution training to India. Witnessing the unfolding famine, the FAU instead began to provide food and medical relief in affected areas. During his stay in India Alexander fostered ties to Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, a development that upset the colonial authorities.¹¹⁴ The Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, who had become infamous for his role during the unfolding crisis in Bengal, could not wait to see Alexander leave:

I shall frankly be relieved when he is out of this country and away. I am quite prepared to accept that he is well meaning. But his mind works, as is so often the case with people of his type, in a peculiarly tortuous manner, and I would not trust him at any times not to cause us material embarrassment.¹¹⁵

Leaving for England in August 1943 did not stop Alexander from causing 'material embarrassment' as he went on to publish his views on the famine in Bengal in British dailies such as *The Times* and *The Spectator*.¹¹⁶

Others too had newly joined the Committee without necessarily endorsing the views of the India League, which illustrates Menon's ability to utilise his various networks to rally support behind British food relief for India. One such case was the Australian Bishop Geoffrey F. Cranswick, who worked as secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Calcutta from 1938 to 1944.¹¹⁷ Parallel to his endorsement of the Indian Relief Committee, Cranswick addressed the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, with an unofficial request for the support of the missionaries' efforts for famine relief in Bengal. He suggested that he opened a fund to benefit the missionary's famine relief work.¹¹⁸ As a consequence, the British Council of Churches joined ranks with the already established funds of British Quakers and Indian nationalists to widen the reach of appeals for Indian famine relief to Christian audiences in Britain.

The involvement of this range of non-official bodies made it increasingly hazardous for the colonial apparatus to stay aloof from the quest to save the starving of Bengal. Initially the Government diluted its responsibility by pointing to the tokenistic autonomy of the provincial government of Bengal, established in the Government of India Act in 1935 and subsequently eroded through legal mechanisms throughout the war.¹¹⁹ Later, the official strategy entailed the staging of British benevolence towards the starving in India, which was followed by the early announcement of its success in mitigating the crisis. This strategic use of colonial benevolence had also shown in an earlier campaign in which British officials in Britain raised funds for Bengal's coastal districts which had been ravaged by a cyclone in mid-October 1942.

After the colonial government had come under attack for the delay of relief efforts in Midnapore, where the District Magistrate tried to crush anti-colonial revolt, the High Commissioner of India in Britain in close cooperation with the Secretary of State for India L.S. Amery and the Mayor of London had launched a public appeal in January 1943.¹²⁰ After seeking further support from eminent public figures such as the former Governor of Bengal John Anderson, it was decided that an appeal should be published in *The Times* followed by a five minute broadcast through the BBC, and the publication of letters of support of London's business class on three consecutive days in early January 1943.¹²¹ Mansion House had also suggested using a film but was unable to get recordings from India. Given the lack of visual material, the organisers of the fund decided to stick to 'colourful details.'¹²²

At the same time, it seems, to give publicity to the cyclone in India through the Lord Mayor's Fund proved less controversial because the crisis was attributable to the forces of nature. During the famine unfolding in Bengal, the situation was different. It quickly became clear that the misery had been aggravated, if not caused, by British policies. To recognise the existence of famine in Bengal risked triggering questions about its causes and remedies and therefore leading to undesirable agitation. It was in this context that the Secretary of State for India L. S. Amery concealed the extent of the crisis and in late September criticised the British press for keeping the famine 'in the forefront in so sustained a way' and feared that 'too frequent mention of its purely detailed aspects [...] would seem liable to give the public a misleading impression of its nature.'¹²³ Only after the crisis could no longer be silenced did he join the newly appointed Viceroy Wavell and the High Commissioner for India in soliciting donations in Britain that benefited famine relief in Bengal.¹²⁴

At the height of the debates on food relief for India, Archibald Wavell replaced Linlithgow as Viceroy and visited the famine-stricken areas in Bengal soon after his arrival in India. His visit was followed by the prompt decision to deploy the British Royal Air Force to distribute food and medical supplies in the worst affected areas of Bengal. In charge of the relief mission was Major-General D. Stuart who quickly announced the success of the campaign in ending scarcity in the province in early December. Shortly after, Wavell visited Bengal again, declaring that the famine was a matter of the past.¹²⁵ In the meanwhile, the British press presented heroic accounts of Wavell and the Army that portrayed the heavily delayed relief mission as an exceptional act of colonial benevolence. Such images and reports perpetuated racial and colonial hierarchies in their portrayal of 'generosity' towards the starving, a generosity that appears cynical in light of the severe delay of the relief efforts.¹²⁶

Despite the provision of relief by the Government, the situation in Bengal continued to be grim. Due to the prevalence of epidemic diseases such as cholera, mortality rates continued to be high. While such deaths were now officially attributed to diseases, such deaths were often the consequence of acute emaciation.¹²⁷ In the meanwhile, relief committees in Britain that had started to raise funds for famine relief in 1943 contributed towards the effort to challenge the attempt of the Government to silence the suffering and continued to mobilise relief for those affected by hunger and disease. For instance the Quaker J.R. Symonds, who succeeded Horace Alexander as the head of the Quaker mission in Bengal after his return to England in August 1943, urged that the funds 'ought not be allowed to dry up.'¹²⁸ In July 1944, the India League entertained a crowd at Aldgate with a lantern slide show depicting 'gruesome illustrations of the emaciated bodies of men, women and children victims of famine,'¹²⁹ while the India Relief Committee organised various activities throughout the year to alert the public about the prevalence of starvation in India. In a call for action in late September 1944, the India Relief Committee

guided public attention to the deceitful silence in the British press, explaining that 'the lack of news from India in our papers is not to be interpreted as lack of distress there.'¹³⁰ In a similar vein the Indian Freedom Campaign reminded Britain in December that 'India still starves.'¹³¹

Conclusion

Although the historiography of the Bengal famine has recently become more diverse, it is still limited to the exploration of processes and events in Bengal and, sometimes, greater India.¹³² This article contends that historians can unravel other stories once they change the geographical focus and discover how the crisis informed debates and practices outside of India. In this spirit, this article reconstructed responses to the Great Bengal Famine in Britain. It concentrated on the role of Indian nationalist associations, which in conjunction with British anti-imperialists campaigned for food relief and the end of the British Raj. Anti-famine campaigns evolved in the context of ideological and political contestations in which famine emerged as a topic enabling organisations to enlist the support of the Indian community and the larger British public. The India League, which drew on its networks to Communists and Liberals to articulate demands for food relief, was particularly vocal. The prominence of the India League in the emerging debate owed to the establishment of the India Relief Committee, which attracted noteworthy public support beyond the Indian community. Other Indian nationalist associations, whether impaired by the lack of funds and networks or simply in a rejection of the idea of private charity, launched campaigns that aimed to increase pressures on the British Government without establishing or supporting a famine relief fund.

This article argued that these campaigns contributed to the decision of the colonial authorities to respond to the emergency in a move that, although severely delayed and limited in scope, averted an even greater number of deaths. From the moment visual accounts of suffering found their way into the mainstream press, Indian nationalists and the British left were increasingly successful in challenging official attempts to conceal the extent of the calamity. This metropolitan perspective on the Bengal famine therefore points to the historical importance of active civil society organisations, including the media, in reminding the state of its responsibility to respond to humanitarian crises. In light of governmental inaction such initiatives constituted a much needed counterweight to official voices. By mobilising food relief for Bengal, the India League filled the void left by governmental inaction and thereby wished to demonstrate the will and capacity of Indian nationalists to cater to the poor and destitute. Explorations of the Great Bengal Famine thus remain incomplete if they lack this dimension and overlook such metropolitan dynamics.

Furthermore, the degree to which images of famine accelerated debates in Britain and were employed in emerging (anti-) famine campaigns provides

an interesting case to study the role of visuals in directing public attention to distant crises. Rather than believing in a direct connection between visual depictions of human suffering and empathetic reactions, this article points to the use of narrative strategies that suggested why to identify and how to feel and respond.¹³³ The fact that the same visuals of famine were employed to make a series of contradictory claims to either support or discredit colonialism, and to pinpoint as well as to dilute governmental responsibilities, stresses the extent to which the meaning and impact of images of human suffering depend on the narratives attached. To understand the role of images of suffering on the formation of movements to mitigate humanitarian crises, historians need to zoom in and explore their contextualisation and framing. In the context of the visual representation of the Bengal famine in Britain, the British press emphasised the resemblance of victims of Bengal and Greece to highlight the need to ensure that fellow citizens of the British Empire would not suffer as did people starving under German occupation. Conservatives read images of suffering as a proof for the incapacity of Indians to self-rule, whereas anti-imperialists framed the same photographs to point to the failure of the empire to safeguard even the basic needs of its subjects. At least in the case of the Bengal famine, there is no straightforward link between the dissemination of famine photography and the formation of empathetic responses. It can however be noted that visuals of the famine enabled advocates of famine relief to prove the existence of starvation and to increase the visibility of the crisis in Britain.

The fact that demands for food relief for India in Britain emerged in anti-imperial circles, in which debates around the degree of British responsibility to aid the starving in India were closely linked to the fate of the British Raj and Empire further sheds light on the entanglements of histories of colonialism, imperialism and humanitarianism which have recently attracted the attentions of scholars but still deserve much greater attention. Lastly, for historians of decolonisation and the end of empire, debates surrounding the Bengal famine are windows onto the complex agendas and alliances preceding the age of decolonisation. Applied as a prism, the Bengal famine enables us to comprehend anti-imperial networks in the metropole that provide insights into the process of imperial decline.

Notes

1. The meeting took place on 12 Nov 1943. Representatives of the British Council of Churches, the Friends' Ambulance Unit, the Indian Famine Committee presided by W.G. Cove, the India League's India Relief Committee, the Indian Social Club, the Save the Children Fund and Lord Wavell's Central Indian Relief Fund were present. *Runganadhan to William Temple*, 4 Nov 1943, Archbishops' Papers, William Temple, Lambeth Palace Library, 345; The meeting was also reported in Indian newspapers.

- For example see “Fund For Relief Work in Bengal. Collection in London Scores of Official and Non-official Committees Engaged.” *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 Nov 1943, 2.
2. Cited from *Draft Statement Indian Famine Relief*. Horace Alexander Papers, Library of the Society of Friends, Temp MSS 577/10/86.
 3. In official despatches the term “food crisis” was used whereas words such as “famine” or “starvation” were avoided. Stephens, *Monsoon Morning*, 188.
 4. On 26 Oct 1943 the newly appointed Viceroy Archibald Wavell visited Calcutta and a day after announced the use of the army to provide considerable relief. 15,000 British soldiers were thereafter deployed to render food and medical relief to the worst affected areas of Bengal. For example see Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 141–43, 172–75.
 5. Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*; Mukerjee, *Churchill’s Secret War*; Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine*; Ó Grada, “Sufficiency, Sufficiency and Sufficiency”; Collingham, “The Bengal Famine,” 141–54.
 6. For a series of perspectives on the relation of representations of suffering, the rise of “humanitarian sentiments” and the formation of humanitarian movements and initiatives see Wilson and Brown, *Humanitarianism and Suffering*.
 7. *Help For Indian Famine Victims – The Response to the News Chronicle Appeal*, Horace Alexander Papers. Temp MSS 577/10/86 (my italics); For the appeal itself see “An Appeal for Help for the Famine Victims in Bengal.” *News Chronicle*, 27 Oct 1943, 2.
 8. For a variety of perspectives on the connection of visibility and humanitarianism see Fehrenbach and Rodogno, *Humanitarian Photography*.
 9. For an elaboration of the conflation of political and humanitarian rhetoric and action see the introduction of *Humanitarian Photography*, 7.
 10. See Fehrenbach and Rodogno, *Humanitarian Photography*; Franks, *Reporting Disasters*; Chouliarakis, *The Ironic Spectator*. For a brilliant discussion the problematic nature and arbitrariness of the representation of contemporary disasters see Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
 11. See the special issue of The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History “Empire and Humanity” and in particular: Skinner and Lester, “Humanitarianism and Empire”; Ribi Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism*; Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; Baughan, “Every Citizen of Empire”.
 12. This also included human resources. About 2.5 million Indians served in the war. Lahiri, “From Empire to Decolonisation, 1901–1947,” 150.
 13. Khan, *The Raj at War*, 93–95; Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 7–10.
 14. In mid-1942 the provincial government of Bengal, instructed by Delhi, began to introduce a scorched earth campaign in the coastal areas of Bengal that were particularly vulnerable to Japanese infiltration. The campaign included the confiscation and destruction of boats and the purchase of rice – two measures that were thought to deprive potential invaders of the means to sustain their presence in Bengal. Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 55–71; Khan, *The Raj at War*, 95–97 and 200–19.
 15. For example see Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 78–81.
 16. Brennan, “Government Famine Relief in Bengal,” 541–66; Tauger, “Entitlement, Shortage,” 45–72; De, “Imperial Governance,” 1–42.
 17. See Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and Information in Eastern India*.
 18. For the press regulations in place for example see Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 125–26.
 19. Alarm was also raised by Indian soldiers who received troubling information about the famine from their families. Khan, *The Raj at War*, 203–206. This led the colonial authorities to think about incentives which would motivate soldiers’ relatives in rural Bengal “to write more cheerfully” in order to increase the morale of Indian soldiers.

- Economic conditions in soldiers' homes and the desirability of making families write cheerfully*, Home Department Files. Files No. 465/43, West Bengal State Archives.
20. This first group of immigrants consisted mainly of students, princes, soldiers, seamen, and nurses who accompanied English families on their journey to Britain and were abandoned upon arrival. These groups were joined by businessmen and visitors who temporarily increased the presence of Indians in the metropole. See Lahiri, *Indians in Britain*, 1–18; Ibid., 50–53; Owen, *The British Left and India*; Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 254–99; for early Indian radicalism in the metropole see Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*.
 21. Relying on information provided in the Indian National Congress Survey of 1932, Visram states that at this time approximately 7,000 Indians lived in Britain whereas the total population in the UK was 44 million. In mid-1942 circa 3,000 Indians worked in different industries. Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 254 and 268.
 22. Ahmed, “Networks of Resistance,” 70–87
 23. Ibid.
 24. Amongst others, V.K.K. Menon was the first High Commissioner of India in Britain (1947–52) and represented India repeatedly at the United Nations (1952–62).
 25. This was a well-used strategy of Indians in Britain to circumvent National Service. See *Report to Mr. Silver*, 1 Feb 1943, APAC. IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32: 19–20.
 26. Chakravarty, V. K. Krishna Menon.
 27. In this role of a broker, Menon had garnered Indian support for humanitarian relief activities in response to the Chinese nationalist revolution in 1927 as well as during the Spanish Civil War (1935–39). By 1943, demands for the mobilisation of aid to Spain and China were already steeped in nationalist rhetoric and directed towards fostering Indian independence. Indian nationalists in Britain and India sought to distance themselves from imperial foreign policy through engaging in international crisis management. Framke, “Political Humanitarianism,” 63–81.
 28. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 128.
 29. Much to the regret of Menon by 1943 the CPGB had the power to determine the content and outlook of the India League’s campaigns as, both in terms of financial and human resources, the League depended on the Party’s support. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 107; Owen, *The British Left*, 265.
 30. After the Soviet Union’s entry into the war in June 1941, Communists in Britain and beyond were obligated to endorse the war efforts of the allied powers. Prior to that date, Communists had withdrawn their support based on the declaration that the war was ‘imperialistic’.
 31. Opposition against the war in Britain, however, had manifested earlier with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 when the British Government declared India’s support of the British war efforts without prior consultation with the Indian political elite. This resulted in the final decision of the INC to boycott the War and many Indians in Britain declared their support of the INC.
 32. In summer 1942, after negotiations of the Indian National Congress and the British Government had failed, the former demanded that the colonizers “quit India”. As a consequence the leadership of the INC was jailed and, lacking political guidance, the protests of Indian sympathizers grew increasingly violent. The INC was banned and its leaders remained in detention until the end of the war. See Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 104–107; Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 68–74.
 33. Brockway, *Indians in Britain*.
 34. Lahiri, “From Empire to Decolonisation”.

35. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 117–21; Owen, *The British Left*, 251–70.
36. Kent, “A Paper Not so much for the Armchair,” 208–26.
37. *Brockway to Nehru*, 6 Aug 1938, Jawaharlal Nehru Papers. Correspondence, Vol. 10.
38. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 67–71.
39. While Labour’s position towards the question of self-rule of British colonies was far from uniform, a major current that emerged in the inter-war period and manifested in the 1940s was the belief in trusteeship and the gradual attainment of political self-government through British imperial assistance. The left within and outside the Labour Party objected to this idea, demanding more commitment to the protection of native rights and to the preparation for self-government. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 82–139. Whereas the Labour Party joined the war coalition, according to Fenner Brockway “no Socialist – indeed, no sincere democrat – can identify himself with Imperialism against Nazism” cited in *Ibid.*, 115.
40. Kent, “A Paper Not so much for the Armchair,” 208–26.
41. Owen, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 268; also see “Swaraj House,” *Making Britain*, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/swaraj-house>.
42. *House of Commons Debate*, 28 Jan 1943. *Food Situation. Relief Measures*, Hansard 1803–2005, Vol 386 cc.597–9. One of the MPs raising questions about the food situation in India was Reginald Sorensen, who was also a Member of the India League and the Bengal Relief Committee.
43. Gangulee, *Famine? India’s Destitute Millions*.
44. *Swaraj House, London: activities of members and meetings*, April 9 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/658, File 2572/42: 27.
45. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 174*, 21 Aug 1940, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/616, File 842/38: 4.
46. Gangulee, *Famine? India’s Destitute Millions*; *Ibid.*, *Health and Nutrition*; *Ibid.*, *The Indian peasant*; *Ibid.*, *Problems of Rural India*.
47. “The Royal Commission on Agriculture in India was appointed in 1926 to examine and report on the present condition of agriculture and rural economy in British India and to make recommendations for the improvement of agriculture and the promotion of the welfare and prosperity of the rural population.” Madan, *India’s Developing Villages*, 35.
48. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 950*, 21 July 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/616, File 842/38: 25.
49. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 174*.
50. For example see: *New Scotland Yard Report no. 235*, 23 Dec 1942, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455, File 721/32: 5; *New Scotland Yard Report No. 237*, 20 Jan 1943, *Ibid.*, 11.; *New Scotland Yard Report No. 234*, 9 Dec 1942, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/658, File 2572/42: 4–5; In Oct Gangulee gave a talk about causes and remedies for the current crisis at a conference organised by the Swaraj House that was reported in length by Indian newspapers. For example see “Dr Gangulee’s Suggestions.” *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 Oct 1943, 2.
51. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 239*, 17 Feb 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455, File 721/32: 48.
52. *Gangulee’s Famine*, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/616, File 842/38: 24.
53. *Standing Committee of Swaraj House*, April 9 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/658. File 2572/42: 27.
54. For both quotes see Gangulee, *Famine? India’s Destitute Millions*, 6.
55. *Notes on India*; Menon, *Unity with India*.

56. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 238*, 3 Feb 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32: 38; In Aug Menon visited the Midland Regional Committee of the India League stating: "India was the land of hunger. Food is not available in greater part of India, and inhabitants have been compelled to eat lotus. The food situation is far worse than that contemplated in occupied countries after the war" cited in "India – Our Responsibility." *The Town Crier*, 21 Aug 1943, 8.
57. Ayub Ali was a Bengali ex-seaman and founder of the Indian Seaman's Welfare League. Through the Welfare League Ali supported Indian seamen in the management of their daily lives in Britain, their fight for the improvement of their precarious living conditions and their quest for equal payment. Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 257.
58. *New Scotland Yard Report No.248*, 23 Jun, 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32: 81.
59. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 112–13; Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 225–53.
60. This was the case of the mainstream press. A series of socialist papers, such as the *New Leader*, the *Socialist Appeal*, and the *Student Forward* featured accounts of the famine in Bengal as early as the first quarter of 1943. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 113.
61. According to James Vernon "For many the beginning of the end of colonial rule came on 22nd 1943", when *The Statesman* in Calcutta published photographs of starving women and children on the streets of "the Empire's Second City" cited from: Vernon, *Hunger. A Modern History*, 148.
62. This way of framing was restated in a second publication in mid-October, wherein a double paged article titled "60,000,000 of our Empire Citizens are in danger of starving like this" used two other photographs of *The Statesman* for illustration. "60,000,000 of Our Empire Citizens are in Danger of Starving like this." *Sunday Pictorial*, 17 Oct 1943, 6.
63. Curran and Seaton, *Power without responsibility*, 62–66.
64. "Thousands Die of Famine. First Full Story of Indian Horror." *Sunday Pictorial*, 19 Sep 1943, 8.
65. Ibid.
66. "Millions Starve." *Socialist Appeal*, Oct 1943, 1; "If Music Be the Food of Love." *Daily Worker*, 22 Sep 22 1943, 2.
67. Cited from: "If Music Be the Food of Love."
68. "Famine Sweeps India," *NewsIndia*.
69. The *News Chronicle* for which Vicky worked repeatedly tried to challenge the general silence of the British press with regard to the famine conditions in East India. Its ability to inform the public was due to the work of its correspondent Stuart W. Emeny, who was sent to Calcutta in 1942 to report about the war. Until his tragic death in a plane crash in 1944, Emeny provided the paper with "impressive descriptive accounts" from India. "The Story of Stuart Emeny." *News Chronicle*, 3 April 1943, 2.
70. This becomes evident in some of his drawings, which merged multiple scenes depicted in separate photographs into one appalling account.
71. Unlike its "First Full Story" that did not include images, the *Sunday Pictorial* published two photographs in a follow-up in late Sep. See: "They Are Dying," *Sunday Pictorial*, 26 Sept, 7.
72. The English-owned *The Statesman* was known to be a conservative newspaper and loyal to the British regime in India. However during the famine it increasingly became critical of governmental inaction. Unlike contemporary Anglo-Indian newspapers in Bengal, *The Statesman's* status as a well-reputed English language newspaper provided it with the necessary leverage to experiment with the legal press regulations

- in place and led to the courageous decision to print images of victims of starvation in the streets of Calcutta. Photographs of the famine appeared in *The Statesman* between Aug 22 and Oct 24 1943 and they were subsequently reprinted in Jan 1944 in a special edition titled "Maladministration in Bengal". The decision of the editorial board of *The Statesman* to publish famine photographs was important in sparking international media attention. Stephens, *Monsoon Morning*, 183–97; Masani, *Indian Tales*, 44–45; "Bengal's Foodless." *The Statesman*, 22 Aug 1943
73. "They Are Dying." *Sunday Pictorial*.
 74. Levine, "States of Undress," 189–219; Ryan, *Photographing Empire*; Pinney, *The Coming of Photography*.
 75. See the introduction in Fehrenbach and Rodogno. *Humanitarian Photography*.
 76. For the use of famine photography in connection to calamities in nineteenth century India see: Twomey and May, "Australian Responses," 233–52; Twomey, "Framing Atrocity"; Curtis, "Depicting Distant Suffering".
 77. In 1941 Germany occupied Greece and procured its already meagre food supplies for its troops. With Churchill's decision to establish a sea blockade that prohibited the shipment of food supplies and relief to beleaguered European countries, the food scarcity in Greece developed into famine. Reports on the ensuing crisis in Greece trickled into Britain from autumn 1941 onwards. These were largely based on eyewitness accounts of Turkish Red Cross workers who provided graphic descriptions of the harrowing scenes. For a reaction to the crisis in Greece and the renunciation of Churchill's blockade, See Collingham, "Feeding Germany," 165–72; Black, *Oxfam*, 1–21.
 78. "They Are Dying." *Sunday Pictorial*.
 79. For example see "Starvation." *The Western Morning News*, 22 Jan 1943, 2.
 80. Cited from: Gangulee, *Famine? India's Destitute Millions*, 6.
 81. Black, *Oxfam*, 1–21; Clogg, *Bearing Gifts to the Greeks*; Hionidou, *Famine and Death*; Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*.
 82. Cited from: "Starvation". These photographs were published in a booklet called "Starvation in Greece". In addition the Derby Food Relief Committee used the publicity created for the famine in Greece through the movie "Greek Testament" which included scenes of starvation to solicit donations. See "Horrors of Famine." *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 6 Aug 1943, 2.
 83. Demands to aid Greece could therefore be based on the innocence and suffering of fellow human beings.
 84. See Lambert and Lester, "Geographies of colonial philanthropy"; For a perspective on the practice of British famine relief see: Sasson and Vernon, "Practicing the British Way"; Brewis, "Fill Full the Mouth"; Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*; One the British civilisation mission in India see Fischer-Tiné and Mann, *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission*.
 85. Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*; Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship*.
 86. Pinney, *The Coming of Photography*, 98–99; Twomey and May, "Australian Responses," 233–52; Twomey, "Framing Atrocity".
 87. Cited from: "Indian Incompetence. Famine in Bengal." *The Press and Journal*, 30 Sept 1943, 3. It seems that Alfred Watson's remarks on the Bengal famine hit a nerve. His statements, which diluted British responsibility for the crisis, have been widely cited: "There are certain people who account every evil that happens in India to the direct fault of the British Government. Following their usual habit, they have talked much and critically recently about the famine in Bengal. They have sought to prove that this famine shows that we are unfit to administer the country [...]" cited from: "Bengal Famine." *Newcastle Journal and North Mail*, 30 Sep 1943, 2.

88. "What We Have We Hold." *New Leader*, 16 Oct 1943, 3.
89. Cited from "Mr. Herbert Morrison and the British Empire. 'I want it to Last, Because It is Good and Will be Better Yet'." *The Scotsman*, 11 Jan 1943, 6; The quote is also given by Gerhard Altmann who explains its context in: Altmann, *Abschied vom Empire*, 44.
90. Instead of soliciting donations for famine relief, the IFC requested the public to contribute in raising £500 in order to print photographs of the Indian famine on hoardings all over Britain. See Indian Freedom Campaign, *Send Food Now*.
91. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 257*, 27 Oct 1943. APAC. IOR/L/P&J/12/658. File 2572/42: 40–42.
92. The Indian Worker's Association (IWA) gave support to its members by rendering assistance through a number of services, such as helping workers to claim compensation in case of injuries at the workplace or offering a range of educational programmes. Indian elites in Britain saw education as the key to grow support for the Indian nationalist movement, because they believed that through education workers and seamen became aware of contemporary political contestations and would endorse ideas on political self-determination and national independence. After the India League failed to officially align itself with the IWA, Swaraj House successfully collaborated with the latter in April 1943 through the newly founded Federation of Indian Associations in Great Britain (FIAGB). After this, Swaraj House and the Indian Worker's Association became closely entangled. While the India League thus seemed to have lost ground to its small but active opponent, it could still count on the support of central individuals of the working class movement. Examples include the Dhani R. Prem and Ayub Ali. See: Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 269–73; Owen, *The British Left*, 268.
93. *Press Service of the Famine Campaign of The Federation of Indian Associations in Gt. Britain*, 7 Dec 1943, Archbishops' Papers, 351.
94. "Famine Menace in India. Profiteering and Hoarding Blamed." *The Nottingham Evening Post*, 23 Sep, 1943, 1.
95. "Amery Gets the Bird." *Socialist Appeal*, Nov 1943, 3; "Police Protection for Amery." *The Town Crier*, 18 Dec 1943, 1.
96. "Amery Gets the Bird." *Socialist Appeal*, Nov 1943, 3.
97. "The terrible food crisis in India, which is daily causing the death of hundreds, has resulted from the Government's failure to make preparations to meet such a shortage. We are shocked that such a ghastly situation has arisen, and call on the Government to take immediate steps to relieve the shortage". Cited from "The Famine in India." *Bedfordshire Times and Standard*, 1 Oct 1943, 7.
98. In late Nov the *Daily Worker* republished images of *The Statesman* to join demands for the establishment of an Indian National Government and two weeks later employed images of starving children to solicit donations for the India League's India Relief Committee. "India Needs Food, Not Pity." *Daily Worker*, 29 Nov 1943, 2.; "Starving Children Lie Down to die in Calcutta streets." *Daily Worker*, 13 Dec 1943, 4.
99. Olorenshaw, *Our Forces in India*; "Only a free India, enjoying democratic liberties and a Provisional Government chosen by its own people, can fully mobilise India's millions for the defeat of Japanese aggression and victory over Fascism and for a solution of the terrible food crisis." London District Communist Party, *What are the Proposals*, 15.
100. "Starvation in India." *Daily Worker*, 14 Sep 1943, 2.; "Help Tackle Food Hoarders' Call to Indian People." *Daily Worker*, 28 Sep 1943, 4; "Workers Demand Relief for Starving India." *Daily Worker*, 27 Sep 1943, 3; "NCOs-Army and ATS-Tell Govt. 'Starving People of India are Our Fellow Citizens'". *Daily Worker*, 1 Oct 1943, 3.

101. Rajani Palme Dutt (1896–1974) was the son of Upendra Krishna Dutt and the Swedish writer Anna Palme. Since his childhood Dutt was surrounded by leading figures of the British labour movement as his parents' home provided a meeting place for the British left in Cambridge. Educated at Cambridge and Oxford, Rajani Palme Dutt first joined the Independent Labour Party and later co-founded the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. He also edited the Labour monthly for more than fifty years. Dutt was a Stalinist and a staunch supporter of Indian nationalism. See Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 290. For his full biography see Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt*.
102. Butler, *The Red Dean*.
103. *Bradley to P.C. Joshi*, 15 Oct 1943, APAC. IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32, 126–27.
104. "This conference expressed its concern and horror at the ghastly famine situation in India, which has been developing to the present crisis for well over a year, and the extent and severity of which has been concealed from the peoples of Britain by censorship [...] The responsibility of this present grim and deteriorating situation rests on the British Government and the British authorities in India. [...] This conference therefore urges that the British Government shall immediately [...] facilitate the setting up of a National Government in India". Cited from *New Scotland Yard Report No. 256*, 13 Oct 1943, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32: 137–50.
105. "The Indian Famine." *The Western Morning News*, 12 Oct 1943, 2.
106. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 157*; "Organisations such as the India League were appealing to the British public on humanitarian grounds, but Swaraj House regarded the famine as a political issue and was therefore taking no steps to collect funds for relief purposes". Cited from *New Scotland Yard Report No. 257*.
107. In addition to Birmingham, the IRC expanded to Bristol, Coventry, Essex, Leeds, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Worcester. See *India Famine Emergency Assembly. Invitation Sent by the India Famine Relief Committee*, People's History Museum (PHM), ID/IND/i/103; The Birmingham branch of the Committee quickly acquired wide societal backing: The Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Society of Friends, the Women's International League, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Heads of Churches and the Trades Council were amongst its supporters. See *India Relief Committee Birmingham. Annual Report, 1943–44*. Horace Alexander Papers.
108. In addition to the Communist People's Relief Committee and the Friends' Ambulance Unit, benefactors included the Ramakrishna Mission, the Servants of India Society and the All India Women's Conference. See Prem, *Indian National Congress*, 3.
109. Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) came to Britain in 1924 as a PhD candidate in Philosophy which he completed at the University College of London five years later. In Britain, Anand became involved in socialist circles and made himself a name as a novelist, essayist and literature critic. He co-founded the Progressive Writers' Association in London in 1935 which encouraged Indian authors to address contemporary social and political ills in their writings. Anand returned to India in 1945 where he, until his death, continued to play an active role as an author, critic and activist. See Ranasinha, *South Asian Broadcasters*; "Mulk Raj Anand," *Making Britain*, accessed 19 May 2017, <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/mulk-raj-anand>.
110. "The India Relief Committee." *NewsIndia*. Volume 6, Oct 1943, 2; *Appeal for Immediate Relief for the Victims of Famine, Pestilence and Distress in India*, PHM, ID/IND/i/86; Davies, *Famine in India*.
111. Hansard, HC Deb 15 April 1943 vol 388 cc1365–6; *Ibid.*, HC Deb 05 Aug 1943 vol 391 cc2440–1 1803–2005; *Ibid.*, HC Deb 28 Oct 1943 vol 393 cc351–4.
112. Sorensen, *Famine, Politics*, 14.

113. Another continuous supporter of the India Relief Committee who had joined earlier events of the India League was the actress Sybill Thorndike. Thorndike was a member of the Peace Pledge Union that united pacifists in Britain to oppose the war and also publicly supported the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief. In connection to her support for the India Relief Committee, she had been widely cited in the British and Indian press as saying “if we sent six ships that should have armaments with food in them, they would do more good than all the guns in the world.” Cited from “Swift Action Needed. Famine in India.” *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 Nov 1943, 1; Hirsch, “Authorship and Propaganda,” 57–72.
114. Carnall, *Gandhi’s Interpreter*, 61–80.
115. Cited from *Lord Linlithgow to Mr. Amery*, 5 and 6 July 1943, APAC. IOR/L/PJ/5935 File 4186/1943: 25.
116. Carnall, *Gandhi’s Interpreter*. 174.
117. Daniels, “Cranswick, Geoffrey Franceys”.
118. *Cranswick to the Archbishop*, Oct 7 1943, Archbishops’ Papers, 318–20. The Archbishop took up the task immediately and appealed to the British public through the British Council of Churches as well as organised a day of prayer on Nov 28th 1943. However, the Archbishop was only able to raise a comparatively small sum of £2,500. (For this figure see “Britain’s Relief.” *The Pioneer* (Lucknow), 27 Nov 1943, 8). Moreover, the efforts of the CMS were not well received even in India, where the day of prayer was ridiculed by the Indian press. *Letter to the Archbishop*, 13 Jan 1944, Archbishops’ Papers, 367.
119. The Government of India Act had established the principle of provincial autonomy through allowing the election of legislative assemblies in the provinces. The central government in Delhi retained the right to dismiss any elected Ministry by invoking Emergency, a measure it repeatedly used during the War to maintain control of provincial politics. See for example Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 8. When the press in Britain started to report about the crisis in Bengal, those defending the colonial government argued that the crisis was the responsibility of the provincial government. For example see “Indian Incompetence.”
120. *Correspondence between the High Commissioner, L.S. Amery, the Mayor of London and John Anderson*, APAC, IOR/L/I/1/651: File 442/B.
121. *Turnbull to Azizul Haque*, 31 Dec 1942, APAC, IOR/L/I/1/651: File 442/B.
122. Cited from *Amery to the Governor of Bengal*, 31 Dec 1942, APAC, IOR/L/I/1/651: File 442/B.
123. *Morley to Rushbrook Williams*, 27 Sep 1943, APAC. IOR/L/I/1/651: File 442/B.
124. “Lord Wavell opened a fund known as the Viceroy’s Distress Relief Fund, to deal with the distribution of money received for the relief of distress in Bengal and other parts of India. In announcing this, a press note refers to a joint appeal issued by the Secretary of State, the Lord Mayor and the High Commissioner for India regarding the Bengal distress saying that the High Commissioner for India ‘will be happy to receive and acknowledge contributions and will pass them to the Viceroy for distribution, according to their needs to the different private agencies operating in those parts of India where there is distress.’” cited from “Viceroy’s Fund for Bengal Relief.” *The Pioneer* (Lucknow), 25 Oct 1943, 3; see also: “Viceroy’s Relief Fund.” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 25 Oct 1943, 3; “India Famine Relief Fund.” *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 Nov 1943, 1.
125. Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 172–73.
126. “Wavell Gives Bengal Light in Darkness.” *Daily Mirror*, 30 Oct 1943, 8; “The Viceroy and Lady Wavell at a Free Kitchen in Calcutta.” *Illustrated London News*, 20 Nov 1943,

- 580; "Army Convoys Race Food to Famine Areas." *The Daily Mirror*, 15 Nov 1943, 2; "R.A.F. Feeds Starving Indians." *Evening Telegraph*, 13 Nov 1943, 1; "Action to End India Famine. MP's Tribute to Viceroy." *The Press and Journal*, 5 Nov 1943, 3.
127. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 215.
 128. Symonds to William Temple. *The Relief Needs of Bengal*, 24 July 1944. Archbishops' Papers, 396–97.
 129. *New Scotland Yard Report No. 275*, 5 July 1944, APAC, IOR/L/P&J/12/455. File 721/32: 158.
 130. Cited from *Urgent Communication*, 24 Sep 1944, TEMP MSS 577 12 114, Horace Alexander Papers.
 131. *Why India Starves, Indian Freedom Campaign*, 1944. Horace Alexander Papers, Temp MSS 577/10/86.
 132. The most recent publications include: Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*; Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*; Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine*; De, "Imperial Governance". An early example of a study that explores reactions to the Bengal famine outside India is Venkataramani, *Bengal Famine of 1943*.
 133. For an exploration of narrative strategies in other contexts see for example: Heerten, "'A' as in Auschwitz; Twomey and May"; "Australian Responses"; Laqueur, "Mourning, Pity"; Ibid., "Bodies, Details".

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